

CONSULTATIVE GROUP ON INTERNATIONAL AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH  
SCIENCE COUNCIL AND THE CGIAR SECRETARIAT

**Lessons Learnt from Selection and Implementation of the  
CGIAR Challenge Programs**

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## List of Lessons Learnt

### PART I. SC Lessons from CP Selection and Implementation

1. *The open competitive call for CP concepts has not been successful in generating a sufficient number of exciting and innovative research ideas, especially from the ARIs.*
2. *The expectation for highly relevant research ideas and high quality pre-proposals through competition in a process including two competitive steps not linked to one another does not seem to have been realistic. The only viable pre-proposals have come from the groups behind the original concept notes.*
3. *With the selection criteria expecting CGIAR Center involvement in a pre-proposal, and with the Alliance assuming a collective responsibility for working on the pre-proposals, followed by its collective action at the concept note development, it is increasingly difficult to build viable alternative consortia to address a challenge.*
4. *The research challenge that the CP can feasibly solve needs to be carefully identified at start of the program, and this should be a prerequisite for its approval. The CP needs to focus its activities on a clearly defined set of priority research areas which can be implemented through commissioned and competitive grants and not expect to address all components of the “global challenge”. Only those that are primary constraints to achieving the goals of the CGIAR, not already addressed in one form or another and where IPG research is most likely to result in impact should be identified.*
5. *There is need to revisit a CP program’s scope, priorities and expected results in each phase of the CP. CPs should continuously re-assess their focus in light of the likely funding scenarios and accumulated research results or shortcomings and at the start of the second phase be explicit about the schedule of delivering results.*
6. *CPs addressing very broadly-defined challenges (as exemplified by CPWF and SSA-CP) appear to be slow in establishing efficient and potentially effective programs and have more difficulty in establishing their ‘time-boundedness’, and hence in clearly targeting and articulating what their high impacts are likely to be.*
7. *It appears that crop genetic research (as in the HarvestPlus and Generation CPs) has less intrinsic complexity and therefore it may be relatively easy to focus the scientific effort, make progress and show scientific breakthroughs in a relatively short time frame. Research on natural resource management and institutional innovation may be considered intrinsically much more complicated with multiple potential interactions among many factors, including on social aspects and policy. It is therefore even more important that NRM and institutional CPs have their research domains carefully articulated.*
8. *It appears that those CPs that had a clear and tractable challenge defined from the outset were able to attract and engage research institutions that saw their role in taking up that challenge. Those CPs that defined their challenge more in terms of ramping up the engagement in the current field of research (doing the same but more of it) were attractive to more conventional partnerships and failed to entice new players (ARIs) to enrich and synergise the CGIAR competencies. It is important that a CP engage groups that have expertise in new and innovative areas of science that can benefit the overall goals of the CP and complement the competencies of the CGIAR partners and NARS partners.*
9. *Waiting for a competitive grants process to attract partners can lead to a dilution of effort and loss of focus.*

10. *There is need to carefully consider what level of NARS engagement is optimal for increasing the CP's likely success in delivering relevant outputs and outcomes, for implementation and for out-scaling and impact after the CP is terminated.*
11. *There is need to carefully consider whether competitive grants schemes are the preferred funding mechanism, and under what conditions, to optimise appropriate involvement of NARS.*
12. *The CPs should consider whether investment in supporting NARS capacity to apply for and manage competitive funds is the best focus for capacity building.*
13. *The CP's ability to generate IPG research results and make reasonable projections of outcomes and impact are linked to a clear and realistic choice of a limited number of research priorities and to an ability to get swiftly oriented towards its core challenge of conducting research. These elements are more likely to be positively influenced by a tighter rather than looser time frame.*

**PART II. CGIAR Secretariat Lessons from CP Selection and Implementation: Governance, Management, Finance, and Partnerships**

1. *Although institutional representation of CP consortia members or partners in the governance structure has merits (e.g. enhanced ownership of the program and promotion of harmonious working relationship at the research level), a governance body that is composed of independent individuals with no institutional connection to consortium members or CP partners appears to have more advantages and higher potential for effective and efficient performance.*
2. *The organizational structure of a CP should allow for independent governance as stipulated in the CP definition. However, it should also take into account the need for support provided by a host institution as a legally constituted entity. Programmatic decisions should be left entirely to the CP's steering committee.*
3. *Consistent with the CPER recommended framework towards more independent and more effective governance, CP management (Director/Coordinator) needs to play a considerably stronger leadership role, particularly in strategic thinking and planning for the CP, and be given the primary responsibility for performance evaluation of CP staff and management team.*
4. *On funding issues,*
  - *CPs have not caused a decrease in Center funding nor have they diverted the resources from unrestricted contribution.*
  - *CPs were successful in generating new funds for their research agenda and have earned strong level of support from traditional and non traditional donors.*
  - *The differences in the CP governance mechanisms have introduced an additional level of complexity in the CGIAR accountability standards. Therefore, there is a need for fiduciary framework that reflects the substance more than the form of the governance arrangement.*
5. *CP resource allocation to Partners has ranged from 30% to 60% over the past three years. This measure depends to a large extent on the nature of the CPs' component activities/projects. CPs recognize that there is still scope for strengthening engagement and increasing further the flow of resources to their partners in the coming years through various funding mechanisms (competitive grants, commissioned research, special projects).*

6. *The additional complexity brought about by the differences in governance structures adopted by the four CPs, makes it difficult to obtain consistent and comparable data for analyzing the CPs' transaction costs. The transaction costs reported by the pilot CPs have decreased as expected since their inception phases. However, management of transaction costs continues to require close oversight.*
7. *The competitive grant funding mechanism is an effective tool for opening up the CGIAR research agenda to other research suppliers. What is absolutely essential is to have clear, transparent, and agreed set of rules for implementing it.*
8. *In general, partnerships in the CPs have been regarded in a positive light by partners. Although there were difficulties during the inception phases, there is a consensus that the partnerships model has been effective. The roles and responsibilities of partners have been clear. The NARS partners have been specifically appreciative of the skills gained through training and other capacity building activities of the CPs. However, there are also challenges, cited not only by the CP partners but also by the CGIAR Centers, that the CPs have to address.*